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REASONS OF THE HEART

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Mark 12:38-44, Job 28:12-28

"My soul thirsts for God, ..."
Psalm 42:2 (NRSV)

Do you know the story of Job? It's about a good and upright man, who loses everything, who argues with God, who will not deny his yearning for God, and stubbornly holds onto his trust in God in the midst of the very situation which seems to deny the very notion of God?

It is one of the most magnificent short stories in all of literature, and because of the subject and the situation, one of the most relevant and familiar in every age, as close to us as the events of this or any week for that matter.

Blameless and upright, the father of ten children, owner of an extensive estate; substantial, solid, secure, Job is. His children love one another and regularly gather in one another's homes to eat and drink together. On top of it all, Job is faithful; in a winsome parental gesture, performs religious duties, makes sacrifices, pays tithes, attends worship on behalf of his sons and daughters who are too busy partying, having babies, living. Job was, the author of this story says, "the greatest man in the East."

And then one day Job's life unravels. The way the storyteller frames it, God and Satan are having a debate about the peculiar phenomenon of human faithfulness, the propensity human beings have to believe in God, to trust God. "Consider my servant Job," God says. "There's no one on earth like him." "Big deal," Satan replies. "Who wouldn't believe in and trust God with all those beautiful children and those sheep and camels and oxen, and a dutiful, beautiful wife. Big deal. You've blessed him. He trusts you. Take it away, all of it, and then see how much he believes and trusts."

Thus the poem unfolds. One day, as his sons and daughters are eating together, in the eldest brother's house, word comes to Job that all his livestock and the servants who were tending them have been killed. And then, another messenger appears to tell him that a great wind struck the house where his children were eating together, it fell on them, and they are all dead.

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return ... the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord," Job says.

Round one goes to God. Satan persists. "Afflict him personally." God declines. "You do it to him," God tells Satan. Job breaks out in loathsome sores, the most humiliating thing that can happen, a sign in that culture of impurity, uncleanliness and sin. People with loathsome sores are not allowed to associate with anyone. The picture is eloquent: covered with ugly scabs, scratching himself with a piece of broken glass, sitting utterly alone on an ash heap, his wife turns on him: "Do you persist in your integrity? Curse God and die." Still Job does not give up on God.

Three friends come to commiserate. They say the kinds of things you and I say to one another in similar circumstances. But first they do what good friends must do, namely simply be there with their friend. They weep, tear their robes, throw dirt on their heads and then sit with him. For seven days and seven nights they sit with him without speaking a word.

Their compassionate presence is what Job needs in order to start expressing his grief and anger and despair and rage. He doesn't curse God, but he does curse the day he was born. "Why did I not die at birth? ... let the day perish in which I was born."

The friends try to help. They repeat their culture's conventional wisdom: everything happens for a reason. Suffering is meted out by God to punish evil. So the theological resolution to this predicament is for Job to confess whatever it is he has done to offend God, seek forgiveness and everything will be all right. All three say it to him. "Admit your guilt." Job hangs on. "I am innocent. I have done nothing to deserve this."

He argues with his well-meaning friends. And finally takes his case to God, demanding to know why this injustice has happened.

Our text this morning is a poetic interlude in the story on the topic of wisdom and the human heart. "Where is wisdom?" Where, that is to say, is the answer? Is there a human thought that makes any sense at all of the mystery, the moral enigma, of human suffering? Not where you expect it, the poet suggests. Not in the traditional sources of wisdom and security. "God knows ... the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Finally, after an extended and angry defense of himself, and after yet another friend tries to help him, God answers. But it is not the answer Job or we want to hear. There is no simple explanation. God does not say your suffering is punishment for your sins. God does not say I sent your suffering to test or to strengthen you. God doesn't even admit that it was all a setup, a bet God had going with Satan. What God says essentially is, "I am God and you are not." And what Job says is essentially, "That's all I need to know."

The answer to the question of suffering is not an answer at all. It is God. Because this is really a story within a story, something happens at the end that at least allows the reader to smile and sigh in contentment. Job's fortunes are restored, including daughters and sons; no women were more beautiful than Job's daughters; Job lived to a grand old age and everybody lived happily ever after.

The story of Job is not the Biblical answer to the question of human suffering, although it is sometimes pressed into that service.

It is certainly not about stoically accepting whatever fate hands us, the traditional patience of Job. Job was neither stoic nor patient. He gets angry, depressed. He insistently brings his case to God, argues, demands. He sounds like us ...

And it is not about God's arbitrariness, choosing a good man to afflict in order to win a wager with Satan. This is not history. It is poetry, fiction which uses literary creativity to tell a truth that does not submit easily to the telling.

What the story of Job is about finally, I believe, is the mystery of God and the equally mysterious fact of human yearning, longing for God, human belief and trust in God in spite of some overwhelming reasons to abandon the whole business. "Curse God and die," Job's wife advises. But Job hangs on. This magnificent ancient story suggests that there is enormous theological significance to the human side of the God business: the need for God, the longing for God, the lament over the absence of God, the arguing, demanding, shouting matches with God.

It is difficult to listen to any music, to watch any theater, to read anything without encountering into it.

It may not be your idiom of choice but the question of God emerges in a lot of contemporary rock music. Oftentimes it is a plaintiff whining about the absence of God, the hypocrisy of religion, and sometimes a simple, straight affirmation of faith. *The Sisters Rosensweig,* a funny play about three sisters, revolves around their religion, their practice or abandonment of it and their rebellion against it. In several scenes characters in the play address it directly: the absence of God, the death of God, trying to live passionately and meaningfully in a world without God.

Even science — particularly science it sometimes seems these days — brings the mystery of God to us. Dr. Elam Davies, my distinguished predecessor, knowing what catches, and sometimes eludes the preacher's eye, sent me a review from the *New York Times* of a new book, *The Physics of Immortality,* in which the author, a physicist, presents what he calls a "testable, physical theory for an omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent God." The reviewer liked the book a lot, found it almost convincing and in the last sentence summarized my point by saying, "The author is straining to find a rationale for the one thing he, and all of us, want so desperately to believe."

We are a Generation of Seekers, Wade Clark Roof, a sociologist, argues. He titled his book on baby boomers, *A Generation of Seekers.* Seekers — not joiners, or believers or belongers, but seekers — a generation in search of something; not at all atheists — only 1 percent, or even agnostic — 4 percent, but people looking for something. His interviews found a common sequence: from drugs in the 60s, to self-discovery and self-affirmation in the 70s, to Eastern religion and transcendental meditation in the 80s, to New Age; and today he says, they're back, hanging around the perimeters of the church, listening, watching, still seeking.

Douglas John Hall is a theologian who writes with clarity and passion and has his fingers on the pulse of North American culture. Hall observes what he calls "an almost palpable discontent among us; a quest for depth ... a dissatisfaction with Sunday School theology and packaged religion." Many of us, increasing numbers of us, he says, are "unable to adapt to the general apathy of a secular, hedonistic society and find that we cannot entirely dispense with God." After a century in which modern science was supposed to make religion and God irrelevant, a century in which God was supposed to die, Hall observes: "that we can't do it — can't nonchalantly accept a world without God." [*Professing the Faith*, p. 22, 24, 25, 130, 132]

You know the story about the announcement of Mark Twain's death in a New York newspaper while Twain was lecturing in England. When he read the account he immediately cabled the newspaper: "Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."

And so the announcements of the death of God, made with complete intellectual confidence for most of the past century, culminating in a famous *Time Magazine* cover in the 60s, appear to be greatly exaggerated. Even more intriguing is that human interest in the topic, human longing for God, has not in any way diminished. If anything, we seem to need, or be in touch with that basic human need, more than ever.

For most of us, of course, it isn't at all an academic matter. We confront the question of God, not listening to a lecture and not reading a textbook, but at the perimeters of our own lives. And there, it is no academic matter. At birth, for instance. I am convinced that young adults start back to church at the birth of children, not because it's the thing to do so much as because there is something about conception, pregnancy and birth that is so magnificent, so incredible, so ultimately mysterious, that we find ourselves swimming in deep water theologically whether we want to or not. It's hard to see a birth without weeping. Madeleine L'Engle wrote that two things happened when her children were born. She and her husband cleaned up their language, stopped using four-letter words and started going to church. She even remembers her interview with the surprised young minister. She told him that even though she didn't believe in God, she had "discovered that she couldn't live as if she didn't believe in him." [*Circle of Quiet*, p. 34]

Watch that, the theologians are saying: pay attention to the instinct for God, the need for God, the yearning for God which you experience. Your yearning for God is the activity and presence of God in your life. "Thou hast made us restless until we rest in thee" Augustine confessed. Pay attention when your experience of deep, powerful human love leads almost automatically into a greater sphere of divine love. Pay attention when your own experience of exultation and passion and ecstasy takes you out of yourself. There is something of the mystery of God in that.

Pay attention when music penetrates your perimeters and touches your heart, when the beauty of an anthem or a symphony, a Beethoven string quartet, or the D minor fugue on organ, cause you literally to catch your breath and sit up straight and strain to be in touch with the creator of all beauty.

And sometimes, always in fact, the question of God is presented at the extremity of life called tragedy or suffering or death. It is not only the literary framework for the story of Job, it is an experience everyone of us knows sooner or later. In fact our first and primary, and in a sense permanent crisis of faith, happens when our childhood assumptions are taken away. Those childlike assumptions sound like this for most of us. "The world is a safe place. Life is fair. It pays to be honest. I will always be secure. My parents are perfect. My parents' love for each other is strong. My parents will never die." One by one those assumptions are assaulted by life, gradually, almost imperceptibly, and sometimes they are ripped away violently and always, always they leave an emptiness and longing and yearning which we experience as long as we live.

Tim O'Brien is a fine writer whose books about Viet Nam are regarded as among the best to be written. He was recently on the front page of all the reviews for *In the Lake of the Woods.* In a 1990 book, *The Things They Carried,* O'Brien combines fact with good fiction writing to explore the experiences of his platoon before, during and after the war. It is not a pleasant book but it is a great book. There's a lot of untimely dying; young men, not really knowing why they are fighting or who, die not in classic battles but accidentally: land mines and snipers and traps. O'Brien never directly asks Job's question but, of course, brilliantly presents it by describing situations in which it is a question burning in any normal human heart. Why is this happening? What sense is there in this?

Near the end, the author starts referring to Linda, his first love in childhood. It's not apparent what she has to do with a story about war in Viet Nam. Their first and only date was a movie, with his parents, in fourth grade. Linda wore a peculiar stocking cap. He recalls it vividly, every detail. When school began she wore the cap again, during class. Others teased her about her funny cap. Finally one day the class bully walked by her desk and pulled it off.

> "Linda didn't move. Even now when I think back on it, I see the glossy whiteness of her scalp. She wasn't bald. Not quite. Not completely. There were some tufts of hair ... a large band aid, a row of black stitches. ...
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> "The whole time Linda stared straight ahead, her eyes locked on the blackboard. Later she cried for a while. The teacher helped her put the cap back on."

Four months later, Linda died. And thirty-five years later, reflecting on the horror and death of his friends in the swamps of Viet Nam, O'Brien remembers every vivid detail of his first experience of the mystery of human existence and the questions we ponder all our lives.

What the story of Job suggests is that the questions themselves are among the best evidence we have that there is a God and that our own yearning and longing is a reliable experience of God's presence and activity; indeed of God's love and care.

When Martin Marty found himself walking through the valley of the shadow of death, he turned to the Psalms and discovered that more than half the Psalter deals with the human experience of God's absence, God's silence — the winter of the spirit, Marty called it.

> The Book's title is *A Cry of Absence,* and Marty talks honestly about experiences we understand "when the divine is distant, the sacred is remote, when God is silent ..." There are times when honest people cannot "move easily with the rhythms of Country and Western Christianity with its foot-stomping style ... its summery spirituality." [p. 5]
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> Marty finds in the Psalter the assurance that there are "mysteries too deep for thinking out successfully, too hard for easy response." [p. 163]

But every now and then we find ourselves unaccountably moved away from the icy acidness of our suffering and into the loving presence of God which he calls the "Sacred Courts." It happens unexpectedly, Marty confesses in a paragraph that sounds like a personal experience:

> "An organist practicing on a Saturday afternoon in an empty church will evoke memories of childhood church-going back when a naive faith welcomed the Presence. Now, a generation having passed, the one who quietly listens to that organ may learn to suspend disbelief and find a possibility that the empty church could be part of the Sacred Courts." [p. 163]

"My soul thirsts for God, ..." the Psalmist declared.
"When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night, ..."
[Psalm 42:2,3]

The story of Job, the Psalms, are written centuries before the birth of Jesus. But in the middle of one of the most intense discourses, when he is arguing with one of his friends, Job says the most amazing thing: "I know that my redeemer lives." [19:25] God we believe, in the fullness of time, came among us. That coming, that life, is not an intellectual answer to the big question. In fact, the circumstances of that life, its poverty and unfairness, its innocent pain raises the questions again, the question of God and love and suffering and separation and death, only this time it is God's son who is suffering and dying. This is not a poem to settle an argument. What the life of Jesus Christ demonstrated and what sometimes we miss, is not an answer to our question, but a presence — in every valley of the shadow, a promise of love that will not abandon us, the power of an amazing grace that surrounds us every day of our lives: the good days and the not-so-good days, the days when children are born and the days when dear ones die. What Jesus the Christ means — in Marty's words — is that God does not cause or allow suffering. "God participates in the life of the people and suffers at their side, thus meriting trust." [p. 163] Job was right: our redeemer lives. His name is Jesus.

Your deepest need and mine, the deepest yearning of our hearts is for God. Trust the yearning. Live it. Express it.

"The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing," Pascal said.

And an ancient poet, a man who knew the human heart, and the heart of God:

"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God." [Psalm 42:1]

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O God of mystery, we are here because we long for you. Thank you for our yearning. Thank you for creating us to be restless until we rest in you: thank you for our homesickness that assures us our home is in you. And in our quiet moments, in whatever valley we walk, in high and spirited moments as well — come to us: remind us of your love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.